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ABSTRACT

The most difficult part of being a school psychologist is working in a school. Demands for accountability and staff productivity from federal, state, and local funding sources can lead to a lack of flexibility in educational strategy, increased pressure to place students in special education programs, and restrictions on the role of the school psychologist to functions that can be readily measured. Court litigation may result in school psychologists functioning not on the basis of scientifically sound procedures, but in conformity to legal decisions. The availability of federal funds for the handicapped can force psychologists to label students as handicapped in order to receive help for them. Schools on tight budgets can pressure psychologists to recommend special programs for the handicapped which are economically rather than educationally optimal. Other schools save money by getting "psychological" services from people in specialties with lower training levels and lower salaries than school psychologists. Supervision by non-psychologist administrators and teacher relations can also cause problems. School psychologists must behave professionally in order to cope with these problems. They must be educators themselves, communicate with teachers on an educational level, follow proper channels of communication, and get to know their communities. Joining professional psychological associations, maintaining contact with other psychologists, participating in continuing education, keeping up on current research and literature, and being familiar with American Psychological Association standards and guidelines can all help school psychologists to function as professionals. (NRB)

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MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL IDENTITY
AND INTEGRITY IN SCHOOL PRACTICE

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Maintaining Professional Psychological Identity and Integrity in School Practice

The most difficult part of being a school psychologist is having to work in a school. If one listens to the concerns of almost any group of school psychologists, one soon hears of the manifold frustrations they experience on a day-to-day basis while working in the school setting. On far too many occasions, those who are most highly trained and experienced leave the field, enticed by the lure of independent "clinical" practice. Few of our fellow school psychologists acknowledge that the very behaviors on the part of schools that lead to their own discontent are those same behaviors that create the need for school psychological services. In effect, the school psychologist ^{who leaves the field} is walking away from the very client he or she had, by virtue of training, chosen to serve.

The BPA Task Force on Psychology in the Schools has devoted its initial efforts to the identification and clarification of the problems encountered by psychologists engaged in school practice and will proceed from there to the formulation of recommendations for actions both at the individual level and at the level of organized professional psychology.

Since the Task Force is composed, with one exception, of school psychologists, the group has functioned as a school psychologist would, examining the problems from all sides, those

of the psychologists, the school administration, the teachers, pupils and community.

This paper will present an examination of the behaviors of schools as they impinge upon school psychologists and ^{some of the reasons for them,} then outline some possible intervention strategies.

From the "diagnostic" view, let us first look at ^{some} typical school district policies and procedures. Public schools are first of all, community agencies, which must, sooner or later, reflect the values and priorities of the community they serve. As such, they are subject to the long-term changes in public opinion and public policy that ultimately result in the enactment of legislation. Once legislation is in place, the district has little choice but to comply. Problems arise when legislation governing education occurs at several different levels, often producing vast differences between the values representative of the general population and those of the individual community.

Non-compliance, however, can result in losses of the financial support essential to the maintenance of services or even to legal action against the school district.

What then are some of the pressures that have impinged upon schools in recent years?

The public schools have been accused of failing to provide adequate educational opportunities, particularly for the economically disadvantaged portions of our society who have not

had access to alternative education programs. At a federal level, this led to the enactment of such programs as Project Headstart and Chapter I. States followed suit with a variety of programs that include maintenance of minimal competency standards. All of these programs have provided funding to local school districts, but all have demanded accountability. Schools are faced with having to "produce results" in exchange for the dollars they receive, and thus are in the position of needing data. In other words, they must have something to measure. From the pupil's point of view, this has meant an increase in achievement testing, greater emphasis on those technical skills which are most easily measured, and increases in the number of non-promotions because of failure to attain specific performance objectives.

From the teacher's side, the pressure has come to attain stated educational objectives. Should these not be attained, it is obviously either a poor teacher or a pupil incapable of learning. More effort tends to be directed toward "basics" and less time devoted to getting to know the student and what motivates him.

From the school psychologist's point of view, this can lead to a lack of flexibility in educational strategy, increased pressure to place youngsters in special education programs, and failures on the part of the system to deal with diversity of learning capabilities and styles. Demands for staff productivity

measures affect not only teachers. The school psychologist as well must justify his/her existence in some quantifiable manner. What could be more obvious than counting up numbers of completed evaluations? Restriction of the role of the school psychologist to those functions that can be readily measured leads inevitably to poor psychological services as quality is sacrificed to quantity.

When public opinion in the U.S. turned to the view that adequate services were not being provided for the mentally and physically handicapped, PL94-142 was born. Once again, the public schools were placed in a position of having to develop new programs to meet federal guidelines for services. Entire new (and to the schools) very alien staff had to be assembled to meet both the program requirements and the accountability demands. For many smaller districts, this was in fact, the first time they had ever heard of a school psychologist, much less encountered one. The onslaught of special personnel, many of whom did not have traditional education background, was viewed with some apprehension, and in many instances, was handled much as a community deals with a group of immigrants, to ignore their presence as much as possible, and to restrict their functions to the minimal mandated activities.

Thus, in many school districts, the school psychologist finds him/herself limited to the "special education" track, constituting

virtually an entirely separate school system within the district, and with contact with the "regular" system limited to the role of special education gatekeeper. PL94-142 creates a second set of problems for school districts in requiring "related services." Here the district is faced with having to provide services quite outside what has been regarded in all but a few pioneer districts as the traditional education services. Counseling services, physical and occupational therapy require the district to venture even further afield and cause them to face questions over duplication of services from community agencies and private practitioners who manifest an understandable "territorial imperative."

The school psychologist then is often placed in conflict with his/her fellow psychologists in the "outside world."

School districts, like other large organizations, have become increasingly the target of litigation. One has only to look at such cases as PASE and Larry P. to recognize the impact that legal decisions can have upon procedures and practices. Occasionally, as in the case of the San Francisco Unified School District, major changes in accepted procedure are adopted in an effort to comply with legal rulings. The outcome of litigation may be neither educationally nor psychologically sound, yet every board of education must maintain a constant alert in an effort to avoid legal challenges.

The school psychologist under these circumstances finds him/herself functioning not on the basis of scientifically sound procedures, but in conformity to a legal decision. This can lead both to ethical problems and to administrative kinds of conflict within the school organization.

Although school districts must comply with federal and state regulations, they are most directly responsible to their local community. Not only do they derive their primary financial support from a local tax base, but the school board itself must, on a day-to-day basis, meet the demands and challenges of its citizenry. From the affirmative action demands of minority constituencies in the large urban districts to demands for prayer in the schools or elementary school foreign language instruction, the school board, whether appointed or elected, must ultimately answer to these groups. Once again, their decisions may be politically determined rather than educationally rational.

Finances are a constant source of difficulty to school districts. Tax revolts have been widespread in recent years and school boards must continually seek to provide those services their communities demand, as well as to support all federally and state mandated programs. There is a constant pressure to contain costs.

The availability of federal funds for the "handicapped" has led to one of the major problems for school psychology, that of

having to label pupils as handicapped in order to be able to provide an appropriate education program. Thus many school districts with large disadvantaged populations end up declaring disproportionately large numbers of pupils to be handicapped.

The problems of providing special programs for the handicapped again prove to be sources of anguish and conflict for school psychologists. Pressures to recommend the program that is economically rather than educationally optimal lead to situations such as the Forrest case, where the school psychologist was discharged because of her insistence that a specific type of special education program was needed rather than the less costly one offered by the school district.

School districts attempt to lower operating costs through the mechanism of "cut-rate" staffing. Given a choice, when a vacancy occurs, many districts will seek the school psychologist with the minimal level of training and little experience. When the time arrives for the commitment to tenure, the higher priced school psychologist may not receive a contract renewal. These factors lead to minimal quality of psychological services as well as a lack of continuity.

Districts have also learned that it is possible to provide the minimal mandated services by contracting with independent psychologists or with community agencies on a "per case" basis. While this may result in good quality of service for the

individual pupil, the "contract psychologist" usually disappears from the scene, leaving the school with a report and perhaps a label, but not providing the on-going oversight for the pupil or any of the consultation services a staff psychologist would provide.

Schools have found that it is possible to get services similar (in their eyes) to those offered by a school psychologist by utilizing other "specialties" which require lower training levels and therefore command lower salaries. The services provided form a type of pseudo-psychology which looks quite impressive.

School districts, like most organizations, have traditions which have been well established long before the advent of the school psychologist. Those structures and chains of command which are in place often constitute a problem for the school psychologist who doesn't always "fit" into that organizational logic.

School administrators are, by and large, very orderly people who like to have their entire system arranged in very neat categories. School psychologists, with their different credentials and very different ways of functioning, don't fit into the established categories. Examining a school organization chart, the psychologist is usually tucked somewhere over to one side, disrupting the beautiful symmetry. Within the school

organization, supervision by the administrator in charge of the unit is a traditional part of the system. This creates a multiplicity of problems for the school psychologist. The Standards for Providers clearly states that only a doctoral level psychologist can supervise another psychologist, yet within the school system, the psychologist is often confronted by the prospect of professional supervision by someone who may not be a doctoral level psychologist and who may not, in fact, be a psychologist at all. Should the psychologist agree to this kind of supervision, he/she is violating professional standards. On the other hand, failure to agree within the context of the school system puts the school psychologist in a position of being guilty of insubordination. Collective bargaining has become a fact of life for almost every school organization. While in some instances this can be beneficial to the school psychologist, in many situations, it can constitute a major problem. The district faces the negotiation process on a regular basis, and is relieved when it can get agreement on a contract with the teachers. Psychologists, unless they have agreed to be paid on the same salary scale as teachers, constitute simply one more group (and a very small one) with which negotiations must take place. Teachers' unions will seldom support a separate, higher salary guide for psychologists. As numbers of psychologists working in

school districts have increased, pressure to "fold" psychologists into teacher salary guides have increased.

School administrators are generally quick to agree to inclusion of psychologists in teacher salary guides. First, it saves the district money, second, it helps to eliminate a separate negotiation process, it helps to fit the psychologists into the organization chart, and lastly, it keeps the teachers happy, since those psychologists are not earning any more than they themselves are.

Teachers are not always happy with school psychologists. School psychologists don't have to have playground or lunchroom duty, school psychologists don't have to grade papers after school hours, school psychologists can deal with just one child at a time instead of having to control an entire class. School psychologists come along when the teacher is confronting a problem which he/she cannot cope, i.e., the school psychologist sees one's failures. Worst of all, school psychologists go out to lunch.

How then, does the school psychologist approach these issues. There are, first of all, actions to be taken within the school system itself.

Behaving as a professional psychologist is essential. The moment that the school psychologist starts reacting as a disgruntled employee, the administrator is at an advantage. Administrators are familiar with the techniques of dealing with

employees who are dissatisfied. They do not feel the same advantage when talking with the psychologist.

School psychologists have training in those skills required to facilitate learning. In order to utilize those skills however, there is a preliminary education task: that of communicating to school personnel that they are equipped to offer this service.

School psychologists can and should be educators. Every opportunity to talk with someone in the district, administrator, teacher, school secretary, custodian can be an opportunity to educate about some aspect of school psychology and what it can offer. Rather than complain about restrictions of function or demands for production, positive suggestions about how school psychology hours can be utilized most effectively in prevention programs, in-service training and other activities.

Get to know the community. Read the local paper to learn what issues are of primary concern to the district residents. Attend school board meetings to learn the ways in which the board itself functions as well as to become familiar with those members of the community who address issues to the board. Become aware of the special interest groups and what they demand. Become familiar with the school budget; it can tell you a great deal about the district's priorities.

Within the system, speak in English, rather than in psychology. By attempting to maintain the psychologist mystique

you will continue to be looked upon as an alien. Learn the language of education and use it for making suggestions to teachers. A classroom teacher does not want a long theoretical explanation of the dynamics underlying a behavior...the teacher wants to know how to get a non-reading child to read!

Be a realist. Develop programs that can be implemented in a classroom within the context of a teacher's resources. Identify the successful teachers and learn the techniques that they use on a regular basis. Competent teachers will find you to be an outstanding school psychologist if you ask to "borrow" some of their instructional approaches.

Follow proper channels of communication; Assistant Superintendents worry a good deal about being by-passed. If you have ideas or suggestions, call the administrator for an appointment, but before the scheduled time, provide a memo describing your proposal. School administrators do not like to be called upon without being prepared with some background materials and are more likely to react favorably to a suggestion if they've had the opportunity to think it through.

Working in a school system can be an exciting and rewarding experience. Often, however, it's a long way from the developments and ideas of professional psychology. Unless one is working in a large school district where many psychologists are employed, the opportunities for colleagueal relationships are quite limited.

This is where membership and active participation in organized psychology at the local, state, and national levels can fill an important need. Development of personal and professional relationships with psychologists in other fields can provide stimulation and an infusion of new ideas that may be lacking in the school setting.

Contact with other psychologists can serve an important function in helping to support good educational programs in a school district. If kept informed on educational issues, your fellow psychologists can be valuable citizen allies in support of needed educational programs. State and national psychological organizations have access to legislators who may be directly involved with legislation affecting psychology in the schools.

Working in a setting where one's colleagues are not psychologists can often lead to a situation where one feels a lack of personal professional growth. Here, participation in continuing education programs can help to foster development in one's own, or allied areas of specialization. Again, the local, state and regional psychological associations are excellent sources of programs.

Maintaining familiarity with current research is still another way of assuring contact with professional developments. The many excellent journals available can be a further source of stimulation. The absence of adequate psychological supervision in

many school districts is a problem that can be dealt with a variety of ways. If you are a persuasive salesperson, it is often possible to get school districts to pay for supervision outside of the system. Local universities may be able to offer supervision at a relatively low cost, even if it must be funded from your own resources. Peer supervision should not be overlooked. Regularly scheduled group meetings with other school psychologists in your own or neighboring districts can provide not only useful review of your own practices, but the personal support that may be lacking in the relative loneliness of school practice.

Above all, a familiarity with APA Standards for Providers of Psychological Services and with the Ethical Guidelines is essential. Periodic rereading of these standards can help to reexamine one's own day-to-day practices and assure that one is indeed living up to the highest standards of professional school psychology.